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ABSTRACT

This study examined the strategies teachers use to promote social play among special needs students and their nonhandicapped classmates. Children with special needs confront teachers in mainstreamed early childhood programs with the responsibility of promoting social interaction and peer acceptance among children with different levels of maturity, social skill, and experience. Subjects in this study were enrolled in a mainstreamed, early childhood program which included five children with special needs and five nonhandicapped peers of the same age. Two of the handicapped children had Downs' syndrome, and three had developmental disabilities associated with neurological impairments. All subjects with special needs had communication problems; two were nonverbal and three had severe language delays. Two were on medication for epilepsy. There were three teachers in the program. Data were gathered by means of 6 months of weekly 45-minute observations from a viewing room during morning free play periods. Six videotapes were made to permit cross-checking of observations. Results indicated that teachers can successfully facilitate peer play with strategies such as initiation of play, participation, and elaboration. It is concluded that teacher strategies mediate prosocial behavior and encourage and invite participation. (RH)

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Teachers At Play: Strategies To Promote Social Play Between Children with Special Needs and Their Non-Handicapped Peers

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Teachers At Play: Strategies to Promote Social Play Between Children with Special Needs and Their Non-handicapped Peers

ABSTRACT

Children with special needs confront teachers in mainstreamed early childhood programs with the need to promote social interaction and peer acceptance among children with different levels of maturity, social skill and experience. This study examined the strategies teachers use to promote social play. The subjects were enrolled in a mainstreamed early childhood program which included five children with special needs and five non-handicapped peers of the same age. There were three teachers in the program.

The results indicated that teachers can successfully facilitate peer play with strategies such as initiation of play, participation and elaboration. Teacher strategies mediate prosocial behavior and encourage and invite participation.

Teachers At Play: Strategies To Promote Social Play Between Children with Special Needs and Their Non-handicapped Peers

Early childhood programs include children with a wide range of special needs. These mainstreamed early childhood programs provide many more varied social opportunities for children with special needs than segregated settings. A variety of social encounters is important in developing prosocial behavior among children (Field et al, 1982; Federlein et al, 1982). Teachers of these programs are discovering that active social encounters and spontaneous peer play do not happen without careful planning and intervention. Children with special needs have a wide range of communication and developmental problems. It is not easy for teachers to promote social interaction and peer acceptance among children with widely varying levels of maturity and ability. This purpose of this article is to describe some successful strategies that teachers use to promote social play.

Social Competence and Play

Social play is how young children practice a variety of social skills. As children learn to play cooperatively, they explore their shared concerns, develop expectations about turn-taking and make friendships (Corsaro, 1985). Peer play is a mirror of the social competence of the players (Kelly-Byrne and Sutton-Smith, 1984; Fein, 1985, Corsaro, 1985) When children play they establish a place among their peers. Peer play teaches children to cooperate (Corsaro, 1985). Shared play is a sharing of perceptions, a pooling of knowledge, and meaningful communication

among players (Biber, 1981). To play cooperatively requires that children coordinate their ideas with the ideas of others (Fein, 1985).

Subtle communications are involved in establishing play with peers (Sutton-Smith, 1984). Social play can take place without words; children indicate willingness and desire to play by gesture and action as well as with words (Corsaro, 1985). Younger or non-verbal children successfully communicate readiness to play by actions.

One of the things children learn in peer play is that they may not always be accepted by peers. Bids for inclusion in group play are social skills. Children who are successful in engaging other children do not dominate or call undue attention to themselves (Gottman & Parkhurst, (1980). Peers accept children who are most like themselves.

The Play of Children with Special Needs

Visual impairments, language disorders, physical and developmental problems create barriers to ease of communication with peers. Several studies indicated that the play of children with even mild handicaps was less mature, more epsodic, and lasted for shorter periods of time (Beckman & Kohl, 1987; Quay & Jarrett, 1986); Guralnick & Weinhouse (1984). Crawley and Chan (1983). McConkey (1985) and Rednersh and Peck (1986) found that spontaneous play occurred more frequently among pre-schoolers with handicaps and chronologically younger non-handicapped children. Turner and Small (1985) attributed the difficulties in social communication to lack of experience among children with special needs. Nevertheless, Turner and Small found the same types of prosocial

behaviors among children with mental handicaps. These children demonstrated lowered frequency of prosocial behaviors and the lowered rates of prosocial activities tend to deter mutual social involvement unless adults assist children to establish play relationships Turner and Small 1985). Goldstein and Strain (1988) and McConkey (1985) demonstrated that children with special needs learn to play by experiencing play with both adults and peers.

Role of Teachers

Teachers mediate social interactions by the way they structure the play environment and enable participation (Prestsky & Hooper, 1984; Turner & Small, 1985). Planned intervention facilitates social interaction (Dewey et all, 1989; Peck et al, 1988; Green, 1984). Situational factors play a major role in providing a context for peer relations (Garvey, 1986) The toys available, attitudes of the teachers, organizational features of the play space, all contribute to context in which peer play occurs. Teachers who actively participate in children's play facilitate peer interactions (Green, 1984; Rogow, 1981;1988). Peterson (1982) noted that children with special needs are chosen as play partners when teachers structure the interactions.

How teacher strategies facilitate the interactions between children with special needs and their peers is an important area of investigation. This study was designed to investigate the effects of a variety of teacher strategies intended to promote social play.

Method

Subjects

The ten subjects of this study were in an integrated early childhood program. Five children had special needs; two had Downs' syndrome, and three had developmental disabilities associated with neurological impairments. All the subjects with special needs had communication problems; two were non-verbal and three had severe language delays. Two subjects were on medication for epilepsy. The handicapped subjects will be referred to as HC. All subjects were between 3.8 and five years of age at the beginning of the study. The HC subjects ranged in age from 4.0 to 5.0 years of age. Five subjects were non-handicapped and will be referred to as NHC. NHC subjects ranged in age from 3.8 to 4.6 years at the beginning of the study. There were three teachers responsible for the program.

Data Collection

The data collected were those teacher activities that were designed to promote social play and the social play activities of the subjects. The data were gathered over six months of weekly 45 minute observations from a viewing room during morning free play periods. In addition six videotapes were made to permit cross checking of observations. Two raters, the author and a teacher were involved in the frequency counts of teacher strategies and child social play observed on the videotapes.

Procedure

The teacher strategies were described in the following categories:

1. Teachers initiated play by setting up large play props for group play (e.g. large cardboard grocery store, toy train, toy bus, cooking equipment). Teachers also intiated play by verbally inviting children to play.
2. Teachers participated in social play by taking active play roles e.g. teacher pretends to be train conductor.
3. Teachers elaborated play episodes by bringing additional toy props or making clarification statements to make children aware of possibilities of pretend play (e.g. "Isn't the train bumpy?")
4. Teachers assisted play by bringing needed objects during ongoing play episodes. (e.g. teacher brought more water for water table or helped children locate needed toy props).
5. Teacher praises prosocial play .
6. Teachers physically carried child to group or held child on lap while playing or sitting with group of children.

Instances of teachers playing with one child alone were also noted. Frequency of occurrence of the six types of teacher interventions were made with both HC and NHC subjects. Percentages of incidence of types of teacher strategies were calculated from frequency counts of six diferent stratgies used with both HC and NHC subjects.

Children's play was noted to be social if it involved two or more children in a collaborative effort.

Results

The Effects of Teacher Strategies

1. Teacher Initiation of Play

Teachers initiatied play by setting up large toy props, such as a large toy bus, a grocery store, a toy train complete with tracks. These toy props elicited the interest of both HC and NHC subjects. HC subjects participated in group play with NHC subjects 40% of the time. At other times only NHC subjects only were involved in group play with the props.

2. Teacher Participation

Teachers took active play roles most frequently when they played with HC subjects. Teachers actively participated in group play in order to involve HC subjects. On 61% of the occasions where teachers took an active play role, HC subjects were included.

3. Teacher Elaboration

Most instances of elaboration occurred with HC subjects. Teachers elaborated the play of HC subjects 75% compared with 25% for NHC subjects.

4. Teacher Assistance

Teachers assisted HC subjects far more often than they assistd NHC subjects to play. Instances of assistance occurred with HC subjects 64% of the time compared with 36% for NHC subjects.

5.Teacher Sits With Group or Holds Child on Lap While Sitting with Group.

Teachers sat with groups of children while they played more often when the group included an HC subject. They sat near the group 77% of the time when the group included an HC subject compared with 23% of sitting with a group that did not include an HC subject. Teachers rarely held an NHC subject on their laps. Except for one occasion with an NHC subject, teachers held HC subjects on their laps while siting or playing with a group.

6. Teacher Praise

Teachers frequently praised prosocial behavior on the part of both HC and NHC subjects. Instances of teacher praise were equally divided between the two groups.

Differences in Teacher Strategies Between HC and NHC Subjects

Teachers generally gave more verbal directions to NHC subjects and interfered less in their play. NHC subjects more often chose their own play equipment and instituted more interactive play. Most of the strategies teachers employed were directed towards inclusion of HC subjects. Of all the instances of teacher intervention, 70% occurred with HC subjects. Teachers also played with one HC subject alone far more frequently than they played with NHC subjects alone. Of those occurrences of teacher play with one child, 77% were with HC subjects compared to 23% for NHC subjects.

An inter-rater reliability score of 92% was obtained.

Table i shows the percentage of frequencies of teacher strategies with both HC and NHC subjects.

(Place Table I about here)

Children's Play

There was a dramatic increase in the frequency of social play between HC and NHC subjects during the six months of observations. The frequency of play between HC and NHC subjects doubled and increased from 15% to 30%. At the end of the study, HC subjects were involved in social and collaborative play in 30% or in one third of their play activities. NHC subjects were engaged in social play in 60% of their play activities.

HC subjects engaged in solitary play far more often than NHC subjects. Solitary play accounted for 70% of the play activities of HC subjects. NHC subjects who played alone were usually involved with construction toys or puzzles. Non-verbal HC subjects played alone more frequently than verbal HC subjects.

Discussion

Teacher Initiation of Play

Teacher strategies were effective in eliciting play behaviors of both HC and NHC subjects. When teachers initiated play by setting up large play props, they often involved the children by giving them parts of the prop. Teachers also made comments about what could be done with the toy props . Comments such as, "Now we can take a big trip on the train". or "Look at this nice grocery store we are going to have." These comments created anticipation and encouraged participation. The large toy props and dress up clothes elicited the most social and collaborative play between

HC and NHC subjects. Large toy props also attracted the greatest number of subjects at any one time. There were never less than two or three subjects playing with these props. All subjects participated in group play for the longest periods of time in conjunction with large play props, dress up clothes and make-up.

Teachers actively encouraged those subjects who were watching the play, but not participating with comments such as "Do you want to play with us?" or "Are you going to be a doctor too ?" Invitiations to play with peers was not always successful and HC subjects often participated for only brief periods of time.

Teacher Participation in Group Play

When teachers took active play roles they were able to model role play and demonstrate play possibilities. HC subjects most frequently participated in social play when teachers were participants. Comments such as "Choo, choo, look out, the train is coming" focussed children's attention and heightened awareness of pretend episodes. When play was underway, the teachers quietly withdrew.

Subjects who were insecure were reassured by the presence of the teacher. In one instance, an NHC subject would not permit an HC to board the toy bus. "Oh", said the teacher, "When I drive this bus, everybody gets a ride" Teacher participation created safety and created conditions of non-rejection.

Single child play usually involved an object such as a doll or a puppet. During play with one subject, teachers effectively modeled pretend play. One HC subject only became interested in playing with an Ernie

puppet after the teacher played with him. One subject who rarely interacted with other children at all was only involved in purposive or social play with a teacher. HC subjects often initiated play with a teacher in preference to play with other children.

Teacher Elaboration of Group Play

Elaboration of group play took the form of bringing additional equipment or making comments while the children were playing. Comments such as "Look at all these doctors. There are so many doctors here" indicated teacher approval of children's play activities and had the effect of maintaining and prolonging the play. Another form of elaboration enhanced pretending. For example one child had a ball and asked if it could be a potato. The teacher replied,"If you want it to be a potato, it is a potato. Then she picked up the ball and said, "Oh it is so hot. I can barely touch it." The child then put the potato into the "soup pot".

Teacher elaboration mediated social play and helped children to make links between actions and objects. An HC subject was carrying a doll. The teacher pointed to the doll bed and the HC subject put her doll on the bed and the teacher covered it with a blanket. The HC subject then patted her "Baby" to sleep and put her finger to her mouth to signal "Quiet".

Teacher Assistance

Teacher assistance assured that social play was satisfying by ensuring that there was sufficient equipment and space for all players. For example, several children wanted to play "Doctor" and the teacher

immediately brought out more doctor kits. This enabled more children to participate in a highly successful episode of pretend social play. Teachers also brought out more water play toys or added more water. Most instances of teacher assistance occurred with HC subjects. HC subjects solicited assistance more frequently than NHC subjects.

Teacher Praise

Praise was another form of elaboration which reinforced prosocial behavior. Teacher praise of NHC subjects while they were helping HC subjects let the children know that their efforts were appreciated. Teachers also praised the group while they were engaged in a play episode, "Look at all these cooks. They are making such delicious food."

Discussions about sharing enabled children to sort out their feelings. One child brought a toy from home and was distressed when other children wanted to play with it. The teacher suggested "It's hard to bring toys from home if you don't want to share them."

Teachers Sit with Group, Bring Child to Group, or Hold Child on Lap while Sitting with Group.

Teachers frequently sat with or near children while they played. Sitting with children enabled teachers to monitor the play and prevent destructive or antisocial behavior. The strategy of holding a child while sitting with a group was often effective in involving the HC subject in group play.

In general, teachers intervened more frequently and with more purpose with HC subjects. These data agree with the conclusions of Green

(1984), Dewey et al(1989), Peck (1988), Poretsky and Hooper (1984) and Turner and Small (1985). NHC subjects did not reject HC subjects unless their behavior was disturbing. Most NHC subjects simply ignored those HC subjects who were unable to participate. This finding agrees with Field (1984).

Limitations of Present Study

The limitations of this study include the fact that it was based on observation of one mainstreamed setting that is not typical of many settings where there may be only one or two children with special needs. The frequency of teacher strategies directed towards children with special needs would not be possible in settings with higher teacher-child ratios.

The issue of accommodating children of very different levels of social awareness and social skill is central to teachers concerns in mainstreamed programs. This issue needs much more investigation than the present study provides. In addition, the types of special needs often dictate the type of interventions and special programs particular children may require. This issue has not been addressed.

Conclusion

Teacher participation, elaboration and active assistance facilitated social play. By playing, teachers demonstrated the possibilities of play. Group pretend play was created, maintained, and prolonged by these teacher strategies.

Mainstreamed settings require teachers to actively create

opportunities for social play and invite children to play. The social context in which social play emerges is determined in large part by the way teachers structure the environment and facilitate play. Participation and modeling are effective strategies. Praise and enthusiasm lets children know that their play is valued and enjoyed by important adults. Children with special needs participated increasingly as they became more skillful players. Teacher participation and commentary created opportunities for successful play encounters.

The activities of teachers can bridge the gaps between children's level of social knowledge and experience and the expectations of peers. However there are some children whose special needs require a great deal of individualized planning and instruction. Children who come to mainstreamed settings with little prior experience and few social skills are of particular concern. Communication problems and lack of awareness of other children require a careful coordination of specialized instruction within the social context of mainstreamed early childhood programs.

Table I shows Types and Percentages of Teacher Strategies

Table I Teacher Strategies

	HC	NHC
Initiation	40%	60%
Participation	61%	39%
Elaboration	75%	25%
Play with one child	77%	23%
Assistance	64%	36%
Sits close/Hold on lap	77%	23%
Mean Percent	66%	34%

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